

EDITORIAL

THE GERMAN ELECTIONS.

By DANIEL DE LEON

THE elections, that are to be held in Germany on the 25th of this month for members of the Reichstag, just dissolved because of an adverse majority vote cast upon the Government's proposed African military bill, are cause for much speculation in the press of Europe, and even of America. Will the Government be given a majority at the hustings? If so, upon which of the several parties will it draw heaviest? Will the Clerical party come out unscathed as a holder of the balance of power, or will it lose heavily, and if so to whom—to the Imperial parties or to the anti-Imperial party, the Social Democracy? Not one of these numerous questions is made without an eye particularly upon the Social Democracy. Indeed, the question that palpitates underneath all these others is this: Will the Social Democracy enter the next Reichstag the largest of all the parties in point of delegates, as it already is in point of voting strength at the hustings? With regard to this particular point an essay by the Social Democrat Dr. Robert Michels entitled "Die deutsche Sozial Democratic" (the German Social Democracy), published in the *Archiv Fuer Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik*, and as full of information as an egg is of meat, may perhaps throw the needed light.

Dr. Michels' essay, exhaustive though it is, is but the first part, or introduction, to a second and future essay that is to deal specifically with the organized tactical-political requirements which are dictated to the Social Democracy of Germany by its component elements. His present essay is a painstaking exposition of the composition of the party, both as organization and as vote-gatherer. The essayist begins with the latter.

The examination under this head—the Social Democratic electorate—is introduced with a review in which these sentences occur: "The dangerous error is committed of identifying the organization of the Social Democracy with its

electorate”; again: “Were we to gauge the number of Social Democrats by, say, the following equation: Socialism = applied ethics + historic-economic knowledge, then, the result of our calculation, supposing the same to be possible, would give a frightfully low figure”; again: “Who can count their numbers, the numbers of those who call themselves Social Democrats but are no Socialists?”; again: “The number of non-Socialists with a party card is considerably higher than that of the Socialists without a party card”; and lastly, under this same head: “With pride are foes and friends of the party pointed to the mountain of votes, polled by the party at each recurring election, and the like of which is, indeed, unmatched. These furnish prettier results than the most favorable of all statistical inquiries regarding the number of the membership could ever have furnished.”—Thereupon follows a series of statistical examinations contrasting the number of organized Social Democrats with the number of unorganized workingmen, the former being found to be but a small per cent. of the latter; second, the number of organized Social Democrats with the number of Social Democratic votes, the former being found to be a still smaller per cent.; third, the number of organized Social Democrats with the number of organized workingmen, the former being again found to be a small per cent.—The figures and facts under this head suggest many a consideration of prime interest to the movement in America. Leaving these, however, for some future occasion we shall proceed to the second main subdivision of the essayist’s analysis.

Under the second head Dr. Michels takes up the membership of the Social Democratic organization. The statistical figures—rather minute than extensive, seeing that the party has, as Dr. Michels puts it, neglected to take its own professional census—prove that the party membership is composed mainly of workingmen, the percentage of the bourgeois element in its fold being trifling, and even its Reichstag delegation preserving the proletarian preponderance of the party make-up. Joining the result of this inquiry to a short historic sketch of the party, including the incident of its change of name at the convention of Halle in 1890, from “Socialist Labor Party” to “Social Democracy,” the essayist arrives at the conclusions that “the class-character of the party was stricken out of its official designation” by the action taken in 1890, and thereby “a stumbling block was removed from the way for non-workingmen, especially middle class folks and

peasants, to join the party”; accordingly, he says, “the Social Democracy is not now only, but never was a homogeneous, purely class-party”; all this notwithstanding, “considering its social composition, the party has remained markedly and preponderantly proletarian.”

There is still a third point requisite to help forecast the issue of the pending elections. Dr. Michels quotes approvingly the hint thrown out by Edward Bernstein that the Social Democracy has become a “Volkspartei”—a people’s party.

A “people’s party” is a political manifestation that is purely transitory. It implies the “pooling of issues” that, at a given period, concern the masses, irrespective of special, and even hostile, class interests. It implies the gathering of forces for the accomplishment of some immediate end that is vital to all—as a finality to some, as a steppingstone to others. It implies, therefore, the gathering of forces that are bound to scatter again so soon as the end, that is the finality to some, has been reached. A “people’s party” the framework of which is proletarian and the captainship of which is Socialist, as Dr. Michels shows the Social Democracy to be, besides being a unique phenomenon, to American eyes, however natural and inevitable it may be in semi-feudal Europe, has a unique role to perform: almost any and everything in the way of political surprises may be expected to be accomplished by it at the polls this month.

The conclusion warranted by Dr. Michels’ essay, coupled with what is otherwise known about the revolutionarily surcharged atmosphere of Europe, is that it should not be at all surprising to see the Imperial Government come out routed from the pending elections, the Centrum or Clerical party badly shattered, and the Social Democracy the leading if not the dominant party of all—leading, if not dominant, by the vastness of the increased poll not only, but also the size of its new Reichstag’s delegation. At the same time it must be kept in mind that “people’s parties,” unless driven by a revolutionary cycle, have a way of often grossly disappointing expectations.

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